

The Peter Principle

In the late 1960s Dr. Lawrence J. Peter wrote a book entitled, "The Peter Principle" subtitled "Why Things Always Go Wrong." When I listed the thirty-two most influential books of my life, I did not list this one due to the high sense of satire. However, perhaps I should have because after reading it in my youth, I have often had this principle come to mind before I undertake any activity of consequential importance. Here is the philosophy: "In a hierarchically structured administration, people tend to be promoted up to their level of incompetence," or, as Dr. Peter went on to explain in simpler terms, "The cream rises until it sours." It has been said, "The Peter Principle has even found its way into Masters of Business Administration (MBA) curriculum."

In the Bible there was a group of men that strived to be something they were not equipped to be. The Lord simply did not permit them to have their way. In Numbers 16, Korah and his cohorts rose up against Moses. Here is the way the Bible described it, "*And they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?*" (Numbers 16:3). In essence, Korah was saying, "We are as good and talented as you are. We are tired of your leadership; we'll now become part of this governing committee and people will just as soon answer to us than to you, Moses." The wisdom words of the Bible speak strongly against unqualified and undesignated leadership when it says, "*Delight is not seemly for a fool; much less for a servant to have rule over princes*" (Proverbs 19:10). "*For three things the earth is disquieted, and for four which it cannot bear: For a servant when he reigneth...*" (Proverbs 30:21, 22a). Moses pled with Korah to stand down and not come against God's assigned leadership. I am touched by the words of Moses to Korah when he said, "*Seemeth it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them?*" (Numbers 16:9). The ending of this story is most sad; God literally opened the earth up and swallowed these rebels alive. This is not the ending I want for any of God's people. A great key to enjoying the success that God gives us is to find His will for our life and do it. Moses was right when he pointed out this was no small thing the Lord did by appointing Korah to service in His tabernacle. He explained, you get to come near the Lord and do service for Him and His people. Don't underestimate what God has called you to do. I love what the Psalmist said when he stated, "*For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness*" (Psalm 84:10). Better to do a menial work for God than a work highly acclaimed by man without God's blessing. George MacDonald said, "In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably or succeed more miserably." If we attempt to do that which God has not called and gifted us to do, no matter what rank we have arrived at in this world, it is still failing no matter who says we are winning. Dr. Peter said this is why golf courses are full of vice presidents of corporations. These are men who

have been promoted beyond their level of competence and, to help them save face the organization, will not demote them and so they begin what is the “lateral slide.” In other words, they are delegated to taking customers and potential customers out to the golf course for entertainment, not because they are of value to the organization in their new position, but because they have become drone bees to the business. Many businesses are happy to have them out of the office to keep them from messing the place up.

How do we keep from operating in the Peter Principle?

1. Know your calling

Happy is the man or woman who knows their calling! The Bible says, *“But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men”* (Ephesians 4:7,8). So we see that God has granted everyone of us giftings. And in Romans 11:29, God points out that He is not going to change His mind about that gift: *“For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance”* (Romans 11:29).

As we study the Scriptures, we find there are ministry gifts and motivational gifts. Ministry gifts would be a gift such as prophet, pastor, teacher, or administration. Motivational gifts would be gifts like mercy, helps, etc. A person can have more than one and pray for strengthening in perceived weak areas. For instance, the Bible says, *“But covet earnestly the best gifts...”* (I Corinthians 12:31a). This is one reason I pray daily for wisdom.

Whatever arrangement the gifts are in your life, God will open to you an avenue of service in accordance to your gifts. Jesus said, *“I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it...”* (Revelation 3:8). To enjoy God’s success we must avoid the temptations to go where He has not chosen us to go. That’s why Paul said, *“For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries”* (I Corinthians 16:9). “Adversary” is a word that means opponent. The Devil is called our adversary (I Peter 5:8). When God sets before us the open door of His plan, the Devil throws some doors open also in opposition to God’s choice. This is part of his diversionary tactics. Although Satan and other men do not have the power to shut God’s door, our adversaries will try to get us to go through their doors. Don’t do that! Stay where God has placed you. Go through God’s doors, not the Devils!

2. Don’t be envious of other’s placement.

It is so easy to admire what other people do that have enjoyed a measure of success in the eyes of the world. The Bible warns us, *“Fret not thyself because of evil men, neither be thou envious at the wicked”* (Proverbs 24:19). Later we read, *“For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked”* (Psalm 73:3). Observe the wisdom learned later in this passage, *“Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end”* (Psalm 73:17). It doesn’t end well for the wicked! What a blessing we have when we do what God want us to do and what a great ending to our life! *“Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace”* (Psalm 37:37).

It is not only important to not be envious of the wicked, but we are not to be envious with God's special gifting of others who are being used of God. God says, *"For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise."* (II Corinthians 10:12).

Paul wanted to illustrate a point by means of personal testimony when he said, *"Would to God ye could bear with me a little in my folly: and indeed bear with me"* (II Corinthians 11:1). So please bear with me in this personal reference. The Southwide Baptist Fellowship was a gathering of upwards to six thousand independent preachers. They would meet together and have a small amount of business and then preach. There would be a moderator and vice moderators elected every year. I have been blessed to preach at this convocation for several years. One year the leadership met and asked me this question, "We are contemplating asking you to be our moderator, but the moderator doesn't preach. Do you want to moderate or do you want to preach?" The moderator would be recorded in the annals of quite a hall of fame. Men of the caliber of Dr. Lee Roberson occupied this office often. Who would not want to be on that list? After a very brief season of prayer, I knew in my heart my gifting was not in holding the gavel in my hand; my gifting was holding that blessed Book, the Bible in my hand and preaching. So I said, "Just let me preach!" Better to do what God has called me to do, than win the accolades of men.

There is more I need to say about this subject so be sure to read next week's installment as we continue to address this subject.

-Pastor Pope-